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References to Jesus in Non-Christian Literature

The New Testament is not the only book from antiquity that mentions Jesus.

Roman Literature

JOSEPHUS (37–100). In describing the illegal execution of James, the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem, Josephus identifies James as “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ” (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.9.1).

A second reference is more detailed, but there is a problem with it. We have no original manuscripts of Josephus’s work, and some of the ones that we do possess have been edited by later Christians who added their own description of Jesus to what the Jewish historian originally wrote. The following quotation brackets words that most scholars think were editorial additions:

At this time there appeared Jesus a wise man [if indeed one should call him a man]. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among Jews and among many of Greek origin. [He was the Messiah.] And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. [For he appeared to them on the third day, living again,

just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him.] And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out. (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.3.3)

TACITUS (56–117). Tacitus records that Jesus was “executed in Tiberius’s reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate” (*Annals* 15.44).

SUETONIUS (69–135). Suetonius reports in a writing from around 120 that the emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because of trouble arising over “Chrestus” (*Twelve Caesars* 25.4). Most scholars think this is a mangled spelling of the Latin for “Christ.”

MARA BAR SERAPION (late first century). Mara bar Serapion, a Syriac Stoic, wrote a letter to his son that does not mention Jesus by name but says that the Jews killed “their wise king” whose wisdom (like that of Socrates and Pythagoras) continues “because of the new laws he laid down.”

PLINY THE YOUNGER (ca. 61–113). Pliny writes about Christians in a letter to the emperor Trajan around 111–113. He comments that they “chant verses to Christ as to a god” (*Letter to Trajan* 10.96).

LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA (115–200). Lucian writes a mocking satire about Christians who are said to worship a “crucified sophist” from Palestine and to live “under his laws,” because he “introduced this new cult into the world” (*The Passing of Peregrinus* 11, 13).

Jewish Writings

Scholars debate whether there may be obscure references to Jesus in some of the collections of ancient Jewish writings, such as the Talmuds, the Tosefta, the Targums, and the midrashim. Occasional polemical comments in these writings are sometimes thought to be veiled references to Jesus, but since he is not mentioned by name, no one knows for sure. The text that is most often accepted as referring to Jesus comes from the Babylonian Talmud, and the materials that make up this work were collected over a long period of time, finally coming together around 500–600. Thus there is no way of knowing how early (or how reliable) the reference may be.

Nevertheless, here it is:

On the eve of Passover, they hanged Yeshu [= Jesus], and the herald went before him forty days saying, "(Yeshu) is going forth to be stoned, since he practiced sorcery and cheated and led his people astray. Let everyone knowing anything in his defense come and plead for him." But they found nothing in his defense and hanged him on the eve of Passover. (*b. Sanhedrin 43a*)

A little later, this same text also says, "Jesus had five disciples: Mattai, Maqai, Metser, Buni, and Todah."